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"MY PASSION IS OUR PASIFIKA PEOPLE"

Pasifika probation officers and vā-driven practice with Pasifika youth in the justice system

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Abstract

Pasifika youth are overrepresented in the criminal justice sector and, most worryingly, within violent offending statistics. Trends in violent offending behaviour show Pasifika youth have the highest rates across all ethnicities. However, there is a lack of interventions designed for Pasifika youth, with the absence most prominent in community-delivered programmes. This qualitative study facilitates an explorative talanoa with Pasifika probation officers. Thematic analysis of data-generated themes highlights the strength of culturally responsive practice and a desperate need for rehabilitation programmes available within the community. Probation officers' frontline perspectives reveal that official responding must be vā-driven, prioritising respectful relationships that cultivate engagement and more positive outcomes for youth. In addition to establishing community rehabilitation programmes, a wraparound approach would strongly address systemic stressors that Pasifika youth disproportionately experience. Ultimately, co-navigation of transformative change would encourage empowerment of Pasifika youth, families and communities.

Keywords

cultural interventions, Pacific youth offending, probation officers, violent offending, youth offending, youth offending interventions

Introduction

Following waves of migration from Pacific Island nations to Aotearoa New Zealand, Tagata Pasifika represent 8.8% of the national population (Stats NZ, 2023). Within Aotearoa's Pasifika community, the majority trace their heritage back to Sāmoa (49%), the Cook Islands (21%) and Tonga (20%); the remaining 10% hail from an array of other Pacific Island nations (Ministry for Pacific Peoples, 2016). Many families came seeking opportunities for their younger and future generations (Ministry for Pacific Peoples, 2016). Tagata Pasifika are a youthful population (average age 22 years) compared with all of Aotearoa (average age 38

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years), and Pasifika youth are a diverse, vibrant, flourishing and thriving community in Aotearoa (Ministry for Pacific Peoples, 2018).

Cultural identity is a strength for Pasifika youth (Ministry for Pacific Peoples, 2018) alongside their multiple ethnic identities (Stats NZ, 2019). Of importance is the recognition by Pasifika youth that they are relational beings, with many (re) claiming their connection to their Pasifika cultures (Enari & Vaka, 2024). A recent report of Pasifika secondary school students showed positive reports of life satisfaction and relationships with family and community (Veukiso-Ulugia et al., 2024). As Pasifika authors and researchers, with Sāmoan/Palagi (first author) and Sāmoan (second author) ancestry, we acknowledge the positive progress and achievements that continue to be made by our Pasifika youth in Aotearoa.

To truly measure the success of any community, one must look at the most underserved and vulnerable groups of that community (Ioane et al., 2021)—this includes our young Pasifika people in the Aotearoa justice system. Whilst acknowledging the huge successes achieved by a large number of Pasifika youth in Aotearoa, this study explores a somewhat hidden and invisible group of our young people. Pasifika youth are the third largest group in youth apprehension statistics (New Zealand Police, 2021; Stats NZ, 2018) and have the highest rate of violent offending compared with all other ethnicities (New Zealand Police, 2021). The overrepresentation of Pasifika youth within the justice system suggests resettlement has come with unexpected stressors (Suaalii-Sauni et al., 2018).

Beyond statistics, understanding Tagata Pasifika requires a centralisation of Pasifika worldviews as conceptually different to the secularised Western perspective (Burnett & Bond, 2020). Although inter-island distinctions exist in practical traditions, the foundational values remain shared (Little, 2011). Reflecting the collectivist orientation of Tagata Pasifika, the Pasifika self is intricately connected to, as well as composed by, the wider bonds with family, village and community (Little, 2011; Mitaera et al., 2012).

The word used across the Pacific for reference to these social ties is vā (Fa'alau & Wilson, 2020). Vā captures the relational space between two points, a representation that is an experiential essence itself—opposing Western definitions of space as emptiness (Ka'ili, 2005). Teu le vā is the reciprocal responsibility inherent in actualising the relationship, meaning to build or nurture the vā (Ka'ili, 2005; Mitaera et al., 2012). This nurturing of relationship, known as tausi le vā, is practised via respect, love and humility (Ioane, 2017a). However, it is expected that at some point the relationship will experience some form of disharmony or violation, referred to as soli le vā (breach of the relationship) (Ioane, 2023).

Offending behaviour occurs within the dimension of soli le vā. A relationship can be breached across a number of interactions, which include (a) between the person who offended and their victim and (b) between the person who offended and the family of their victim. In addition, given the collectivist identity of Pasifika peoples, soli le vā also occurs (c) between the family of the person who offended and the victim and (d) between the family of the person who offended and the family of the victim. It is often thought that the most extreme form of soli le vā is violent and/or sexual offending.

Pasifika youth involved in the Aotearoa justice system have higher rates of violent offending (Ioane & Lambie, 2016). Although some court proceedings have become more culturally responsive, as have some rehabilitation programmes for the incarcerated, those Pasifika youth who serve community-based sentences reportedly have little access to culturally responsive support or rehabilitation. Therefore, this research explored the views of community-based Pasifika probation officers (POs) on what works and what could be improved to reduce reoffending and enhance outcomes for Pasifika youth with violent offending behaviour.

Pasifika young people and violent offending

Violent offending is an umbrella category encompassing homicide, kidnapping and/or abduction, serious assault, grievous assault, robbery, intimidation/threats, or group assembly (Ioane & Lambie, 2016). Ongoing trends show that the first offence of Pasifika youth tends to be violent and serious in nature—trends mirrored among the same population in Australia (Ravulo, 2016)—and also that first offences have later onset (around 17 years) compared with non-Pasifika peers (Ioane et al., 2016).

This elevated severity of first offence and older onset of offending places Pasifika youth in a precarious position in relation to jurisdiction. Aotearoa's Youth Court was established in 1989 to offer a diversionary pathway for youth who offend—minimising custodial escalation and intervening to change adult-persistent patterns (Lambie & Ioane, 2018). Even after legislative changes extended the youth age of responsibility

to 18 years in 2019, offence severity heavily guides case processing. Australia reports equally bleak sentencing outcomes for Pasifika youth, leading to incarceration despite their first-offence status (Liddell et al., 2017). In 2008, two Pasifika Youth Courts were introduced in Auckland to facilitate culturally responsive proceedings and partly answer the call to restore authority back to the Pasifika community, yet specific cultural responses are scarce in the community rehabilitation sector (Tuimavave, 2017).

Probationary supervision is the second largest applied sentence order in Aotearoa, only marginally behind imprisonment (Department of Corrections, 2021). Its implementation here is comparably high internationally, yet custodial service delivery saturates evaluative research (Steinmetz & Anderson, 2016). Community services and culturally informed responses are underresearched.

Contributing factors to violent offending in Pasifika youth

Risk factors for youth violent offending in general include low family attachment, single-parent upbringing, attitudes normalising or justifying aggression, childhood victimisation, low socioeconomic background, early conduct problems, frequent substance use, antisocial peers, impulsive risk-seeking, and reduced educational or goal attainment (Ioane et al., 2013; Liddell et al., 2017). Research has distinguished that risk factors specific to violent offending behaviour in Pasifika youth include being male, socioeconomic deprivation, and exposure to, or involvement with, family violence (Ioane & Lambie, 2016).

Within a Westernised colonial-settler society, Pasifika face greater marginalisation, cultural dislocation, systemic discrimination, socioeconomic hardship and fragmentation of family networks, and higher rates of psychological distress than non-Pasifika (Liddell et al., 2017; Pasefika Proud, 2016; Shepherd & Ilalio, 2016). The complicated cross-cultural reality for Pasifika youth and their families is thought to increase risk of family violence and vulnerability to youth violent offending (Liddell et al., 2017). A youth survey revealed significantly higher rates of family violence in Pasifika families than in Pākehā households (Pasefika Proud, 2016). For youth, acculturation has been associated with elevated violence in migrant adolescents, reflected in comparisons of migrant Sāmoan youth and their Sāmoa-residing counterparts. Within-cultural factors also exist, including unresolved intergenerational trauma, commonplace use of physical discipline and Anglo-Christian beliefs influencing subordination of women (Fa'alau & Wilson, 2020; Liddell et al., 2017).

Community-based probation programmes

Indigenous and marginalised ethnic groups are globally overrepresented within criminal justice statistics (Hughes, 2019), yet culturally informed interventions have only slowly been growing after decades of advocacy (Tamatea & Brown, 2011). The traditional Anglo-Western criminal justice system disproportionately harms ethnic minorities (Steinmetz & Anderson, 2016). Pasifika frontline voices are currently absent in the ongoing development and evaluation of culturally responsive services. However, internationally, there has been some exploration of what works at the front line of probation, together with non-Pasifika Indigenous evaluations.

For example, Canadian POs were interviewed for their frontline appraisals of current practices applied with youth (Haqanee et al., 2015). Prominent findings included limitations in external community services available—due to exhaustive waitlists and/or outright discriminatory refusal—and the general poor quality of available services, which mostly neglected offending-related factors and youth needs.

In the United Kingdom, key principles for transformative interventions for violent behaviour were proposed by Bruce (2014), based upon developments in community practice. A cognitive-behavioural approach was emphasised for skills training and restructuring of offending-related, or distress-inducing, core cognitions. Additionally, all treatment components needed specific tailoring to service-user needs, and delivery included responsively contextualising the individual's background. This required highly trained facilitators and frequent evaluation of intervention aims and attained outcomes. Applying these principles to minority ethnic groups, Sullivan et al. (2016) argued that treatment specialisation requires further attention from the point of assessment to intervention design and delivery—it is neglectful practice to implement untailored interventions cross-culturally.

An Australian quantitative study compared parole outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth (Galouzis et al., 2020). Engagement with a probation supervisor was shown to significantly reduce reoffending rates for non-Indigenous youth, but reimprisonment rates for Indigenous youth were not influenced by probation staff and were predicted predominantly

by offending risk factors. Attending intervention programmes increased desistance amidst Indigenous youth, demonstrating the benefits when offending-related factors were successfully addressed. This study seemed to indicate that supervision officers may have lower influence as agents of change for Indigenous versus non-Indigenous youth.

In contrast, a Canadian study explored what justice sector personnel thought of Indigenous, community-based justice initiatives (Finseth, 2014), and found that Indigenous youth with positive supervisory relationships had better programme attendance than did those without. It was thought cultural responsivity aided the young person to feel safe and open with their caseworker because they believed the caseworker had their best intentions at heart. Organisational barriers to effectively responding to offending included communication and referral difficulties between Indigenous and non-Indigenous personnel. Colonial remnants of distrust between the parties were identified as a driver of poorer relationships and referrals. It was suggested that Indigenous youth, and the overall quality of service responses to them, would benefit from non-Indigenous service responders having increased cultural competency. Finseth (2014) concluded that justice sector personnel's comprehension of the Indigenous worldview and lived history was important to enabling responsive support.

In Aotearoa, Project Kete is a case management initiative for tāne to aid positive community reintegration following imprisonment (Sullivan et al., 2016). It provides collaborative care ranging from government housing, employment and welfare organisations to drug and alcohol services and medical and mental health provision, with additional agencies recruited as needed by tāne and their whānau. Project Kete's strong wraparound approach was tikanga-guided and set within a Kaupapa Māori framework. This included having an iwi liaison officer as part of the case management team. As a result, this is a programme that provides wraparound support within a culturally appropriate framework, an approach which has been shown to prevent recidivism and reconviction (Office of the Auditor-General, 2013).

Current Pasifika interventions in Aotearoa

Despite research identifying specific Pasifika risk factors, Western theoretical and practising models still dominate in the justice sector (Lambie, 2018). Some Pasifika rehabilitative initiatives have been introduced, but only for those who are incarcerated, including cultural focus units and the Saili Matagi programme (Department of Corrections, n.d.; Heffernan et al., 2017; Ioane et al., 2013; King & Bourke, 2017; Thakker, 2014).

Globally, Aotearoa has led the way by introducing cultural focus units—separate rehabilitative facilities (within prisons) informed by cultural values and worldviews (Department of Corrections, 2009; Tamatea & Brown, 2011). The Vaka Fa'aola | Pacific Focus Unit is a community-styled therapeutic setting within a prison that has been evaluated as significantly effective in reducing rates of reoffending (by 5.2%) and reimprisonment (by 3.5%) (Heffernan et al., 2017). Saili Matagi ("in search of winds") is a group-based, violent offence–specific intervention that combines standard cognitive-behavioural techniques and traditional Pasifika concepts to reconstruct violent offending–related beliefs (Thakker, 2014). Programme outcomes show decreases in reconviction (7.8%) and reimprisonment (4%) rates (Heffernan et al., 2017).

External to the justice system, there are registered community organisations providing non-violence programmes and family interventions (Ministry of Justice, 2026). Evaluations of Ministry of Justice-funded providers showed that promising outcomes related to having specifically trained and experienced facilitators, and the cultural responsivity of the programme's practice models, tools and delivery overall (Ministry of Justice, 2020). Community providers reported difficulty in sourcing facilitators who were male, domestic-violence qualified and Pasifika, suggesting some providers struggle to deliver culturally responsive programmes (Paulin et al., 2018).

Overall, therefore, while some services are offered, attention is urgently needed to help young Pasifika chart positive change and to address current trends of violent behaviour, trends that carry intergenerational harm and risk intergenerational repetition (Farrington et al., 2009; Youth Horizons, 2017).

The purpose of the exploratory study reported here was to qualitatively understand best transformative practice when responding to violent offending behaviour in Pasifika youth aged between 17 and 24 serving a community sentence. Pasifika POs, who hold the frontline perspective on youth experiences during community probation and parole, were asked to outline what they believed worked in reducing reoffending and what could be improved. Ultimately, the study aspired to advise the justice system on creating more

positive outcomes for Pasifika youth offenders by answering these research questions:

1. What works in reducing reoffending and enhancing outcomes for Pasifika youth with violent offending behaviour?
2. What could be improved to reduce reoffending and enhance outcomes for Pasifika youth with violent offending behaviour?

This exploratory study was grounded in a research paradigm that is by Pasifika, with Pasifika, for Pasifika. As a people, the value of tautua is culturally central and shared across the Pacific (Fa'aea & Enari, 2021; Le Va, 2020). Hence this research was designed to directly serve the community in a critical area of need (Ioane et al., 2016; Malatest International, 2021). Within the responsibility of and commitment to tautua, all knowledge shared and findings generated are dedicated to the betterment of the Pasifika community.

Method

Pasifika methodology

To centralise the Pasifika worldview, this qualitative study adopted the Kakala framework in its extended six-component revision (Fua, 2014; Helu-Thaman, 1997; see Figure 1). In Tonga, kakala refers to a woven flower garland. Across the Pacific, the process of weaving flower garlands is very intentional, a metaphor for the care taken to ensure culturally integrated research. In the Kakala framework, core values of respect, reciprocity, and relationships guide each research stage, from study formulation (teu), data collection (toli), analysis (tui), dissemination (luva) and the monitoring process (mālie) to community evaluation and reception (māfana) (Fua, 2014).

Complementing this study's exploratory nature, we used the talanoa method to collect data. Talanoa culturally enables the rich unpacking of stories, experiences and perspectives regarding a focal subject (Vaka et al., 2016). Strengths of talanoa include its relaxed, relational facilitation and focus upon the vā, underpinning the authenticity of data collected (Vaioleti, 2006; Vaka et al., 2016). Data were collected via semi-structured one-on-one interviews, befitting the nature of talanoa (Vaioleti, 2006). The study was embedded within the Kakala framework, safeguarding culturally integral and valuable research (Fua, 2014; Helu-Thaman, 1997).

As the authors are Pasifika themselves, it was important that Pasifika protocols and practices were adhered to, and that the methods used, especially the data collection, were authentically Pasifika. In addition, it is important to acknowledge the impact on participants of being interviewed by a researcher (the first author) with the same Pasifika worldview and, arguably, lived experience. It was not uncommon for participants to comment positively on having Pasifika conduct research on Pasifika people, for Pasifika people. Furthermore, it provided opportunities to connect more readily with the researcher, as expressed by participants.

Participants

The inclusion criteria were that participants had to be POs of Pasifika descent working for Ara Poutama | Department of Corrections. Purposive

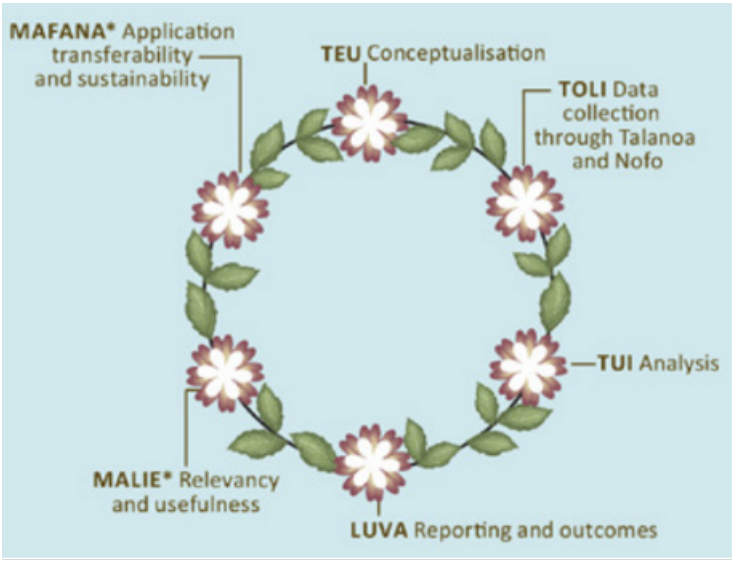


FIGURE 1 Fua's (2014) expanded version of Helu-Thaman's (1997) Kakala framework (Pacific Community, 2020).

sampling was used. In liaison with the regional Pacific advisor, eligible participants were invited via email, and the first four respondents formed the recruited sample. To honour the Pasifika custom of hospitality, coffee and refreshments were provided during talanoa sessions. Ethics approval was granted by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Northern, Application NOR 21/34.

The four participants were Tongan (2) and Sāmoan (2); 3 were female and 1 male. Two had between 3 and 5 years' experience as POs; the others had between 10 and 15 years' experience. Pseudonyms have been used to preserve anonymity: Langi, Ane and Tālā (females) and Aleki (male). We are not including a typical participant demographics table as this would make the participants too easily identifiable from such a small pool of staff. Data were analysed using the thematic analysis stages outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Data analysis occurred at the latent level through a Pasifika lens with accountability of interpretation retained within the Kakala framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Fua, 2014). The second author was acting as the first author's doctoral supervisor, enabling discussion and review of the analysis as it was developed.

Results

Theme 1: Cultural responsivity

The first key theme we identified from the data analysis was *Cultural responsivity*, and this addresses the first research question: *What works in reducing reoffending and enhancing outcomes for Pasifika youth with violent offending behaviour?* Participants reported they had limited departmental resources established for, and available to, Pasifika amongst their caseload, particularly youth. The only departmental supports available were Saili Matagi and the Pasifika Identity programme (discussed further below). To partially mitigate the absence of culturally responsive programmes, Pasifika POs relied upon their own cultural knowledge and Māori resources in an effort to offer culturally responsive care to Pasifika youth:

> We pretty much had all of Pasifika offenders attending Māori programmes and utilising Māori interventions to . . . get them into programmes. (Tālā)

> We kind of try to incorporate [a Pasifika approach] in our interviews with them, find out more about where they're from, trying to make that connection with them. (Ane)

Reflecting upon their own practice, participants highlighted anecdotal initiatives they found benefited engagement with Pasifika youth, which we have categorised into the subthemes *Positive youth–PO pairing* and *Teu le vā builds compliance*.

Positive youth–PO pairing: Participants felt Pasifika youth were hesitant towards the criminal justice system and personnel. They thought there was better engagement with POs who established safety for, and an alliance with, the young person. Such connections seldom extended to non-Pasifika POs. Hence, positive engagement and outcomes for Pasifika youth were attributed to culturally responsive pairing with Pasifika staff:

> You have to create that safe environment . . . so they know we are actually here to help. My passion is our Pasifika people. (Langi)

> [Having] a Pasifika probation officer, you will see a lot of change or engagement from them . . . Having, for example, a Pākehā probation officer . . . they look at it [like,] "I don't want to talk to you." (Aleki)

As participants reflected upon positive engagement with the family of a young offender, they reported that traditional cultural knowledge and relevant language abilities were extremely beneficial:

> Working with their families, not a lot of us do . . . I'm able to speak Tongan, so that's why I turned to the family . . . giving them updates . . . relay[ing] that back to them in Tongan. (Ane)

> I remember going over to [a young person's] father's and mother's house . . . They were quite standoffish . . . I had to use that Fa'asāmoa, you know, I'm from this family and I'm aware your family is from here, and is from this village, and I have an understanding of your whakapapa, your gafa. (Tālā)

Teu le vā builds compliance: Participants noted that compliance and motivation were difficult to stimulate with this age-group in general. This subtheme concerns vā-driven practice that subsequently cultivated more positive engagement with Pasifika youth.

POs stressed their fear of organisational escalation if reduced compliance remained unaddressed:

> Compliance is the main factor that you will encounter throughout their whole sentence . . . For the non-compliant ones . . . [probation] does

> more harm than good . . . taking them back to court, breaching them . . . You gotta address the non-compliance and the violent nature. (Aleki)

A defiant attitude commonly accompanied non-compliance, which participants attributed to a lack of trust being established. To build trust and motivation, investing time into relationship-building was emphasised as critical. From a Pasifika worldview, this describes the practice of teu le vā:

> You gotta have a lot of patience to deal with the attitude to get them motivated . . . The attitude always comes before the trust . . . [So] how do we get them to know that we care? Spending time . . . If they're going to give us Pasifika people to work with on our caseload, they must allow us the allocated time. (Tālā)

To successfully build compliance, POs needed to understand what facilitated positive engagement. Drawing upon one young man's story, Ane explained that positive family bonds and a sense of direction successfully motivated transformative engagement and reintegration. Hence, Ane extended practising vā to include the young person's family:

> [His] first offence, aggravated robbery . . . Not in a gang. Comes from a really good family . . . So, to him, "I'm going to move forward and I'm going to be the best person I can"— those are his goals . . . Definitely motivating key for him is his family . . . [So I] update them with how he's going . . . [It] gives them assurance that he is doing OK and that he needs this in order for him to move on.

The extension of the vā to encompass families in turn successfully creates alternative family pathways to address community breaches. Where the young person is "kind of derailing from their sentence", Ane explained that a good connection with the family means it's possible to "call the mum. . . have that whānau engagement hui. . . so that we can work on a safety plan together".

Theme 2: Community interventions needed

The second key theme identified was *Community interventions needed*, and this addresses the second research question: *What could be improved to reduce reoffending and enhance outcomes for Pasifika youth with violent offending behaviour?* POs felt that existing mainstream programmes, such as alcohol and drug programmes, were ineffective based upon their untuned responsivity. They were inaccessible to many Pasifika youth and their relative language, learning and literacy needs: "With the departmental programme, there's modules in there that they won't understand . . . they walk out of there going, 'Oh I didn't learn anything'" (Ane).

Furthermore, current departmental non-violence programmes were not age- or culturally tailored. They remained focused upon violent behaviour in adults or they failed to contextualise the lived reality and therefore the needs of Pasifika youth. As Aleki observed, the existing non-violence programmes "are not actually addressing what needs to be addressed" with young Pasifika with violent behaviour.

Only two programmes, specifically designed for Pasifika, were mentioned as being designed for all age-groups and offence types. Saili Matagi was commended as a culturally specific intervention, but it running only within prison (not in the community) was noted as a significant limitation. The Pasifika Identity Programme is the only programme currently delivered in the community. Although highly praised by participants, its short duration and primary focus on motivation constrained its effectiveness, according to Ane:

> It's something that's just been brought in . . . It's not for rehabilitation; it's more a motivational programme. Keep them trying, keep them motivated . . . maybe to move onto the next programme . . . It gives them the sense of self-worth in terms of learning their culture.

Furthermore, the programme is restricted to office locations with Pasifika staff facilitators: "Some sites, they don't even do the programme . . . not many POs. But we are fortunate we have a lot of Island POs here" (Aleki).

Promoting the young person's cultural identity and motivation are significant benefits of the Pasifika Identity Programme, but the absence of a community-based rehabilitation programme severely limits the depth of support that POs can offer youth: "Without the programmes, I guess it's just the safety planning, and the working on them with that consequential thinking so they can do problem-solving" (Langi).

Participants believed the organisational response should include interventions accessible within the community. Suggested service improvements were categorised into three subthemes: *Pasifika youth rehabilitation*, *Mental health support* and *Long-term empowerment*.

Pasifika youth rehabilitation: There was a unanimous call from participants for a rehabilitative programme specifically for Pasifika youth with violent behaviour. When asked to prioritise possible organisational improvements, an intervention that was community-based was clearly a priority for the POs:

> We had our Pasifika fono last week . . . and that was brought up. We don't have a specific programme like Saili Matagi, that they run in the prison, out in the community. And I think a lot of us POs want to see something like that in the community. (Ane)

Mental health support: Mental health support was flagged as being inconsistently provided across different sites. Weaknesses explicitly included an absence of onsite specialists and timely referral paths. Staff also felt they did not have adequate training to confidently respond to Pasifika youth living with mental distress, nor was it understood amongst their Pasifika worldview:

> [A] weakness we have in [our] organisation, we're not really familiar with mental health . . . We only know [how to] refer someone . . . [But] it can be too late if . . . somebody comes on a Friday afternoon, and services don't open on the weekend. (Aleki)

> We don't know mental health growing up in the Islands; there's no such thing as that. But now . . . people are encouraged to speak out and not be mā about it. (Langi)

Long-term empowerment: This subtheme relates to the holistic handling of Pasifika youth to facilitate more positive outcomes. Understanding their context and the barriers they face enables services to equip youth with the means to access positive pathways. Recent initiatives, such as the partnership with Safety Assessment Meetings (SAMs) tables and funding driver's licence training programmes, were commended for addressing the broader factors surrounding the individual:

> SAMs table . . . they handle all our family violence reports . . . They work together with Oranga Tamariki . . . police . . . other social services . . . They all talk about how we're going to support this paihere. (Tālā)

> [It] trickles down. Like no [driver's] licence, not getting a job . . . leads them to gang relationship, because that's where they can easily get the money . . . It's just like a domino effect . . . You can see them, once they get a licence, that's a foot in the door for employers . . . job opportunities will open up. (Aleki)

The abrupt end of support when young people complete their sentence was thought to lessen the overall effectiveness of preceding interventions. Having a wraparound response was seen to be more appropriate to maintain treatment gains:

> Setting up a wraparound approach after sentence. Because we no longer have oversight . . . when they're finished sentence . . . Hands off completely. Swiped clean. And then we'll probably see them in the [justice] system in another short period of time. (Tālā)

> I think we definitely need some programmes in the community for our Pasifika youth and for their wraparound service and more of their whānau support. (Ane)

Discussion

RQ 1: What works in reducing reoffending and improving outcomes for Pasifika youth with violent offending behaviour?

Participants reported that cultural responsivity increased family engagement. As Tagata Pasifika themselves, the POs inherently recognised the significance of family involvement. They were adept in cultural protocols and Pasifika traditions, including the importance of family. These findings align with existing research showing the enhancement that culturally responsive practice can have on overall quality of service for Pasifika youth and their families (Ioane, 2017b, 2023).

Participants reported that pairing Pasifika POs with Pasifika youth made a huge difference to engagement levels. Many mechanisms likely underlie the effectiveness of positive PO–youth pairing. Most strikingly, however, was the extent to which POs' practice was values-driven, a strength that honours the vā *and* the youth, and shows their explicit commitment to helping Pasifika. The vā built upon such motivation seemed to facilitate mana-enhancing relationships with youth. Mana is significant across the Pacific, from Hawai'i to Tahiti and Sāmoa—it is a life force that emanates power and influence, not physically but on a spiritual plane (Tomlinson & Kāwika Tengan, 2016). The resulting increased engagement can be explained by the culturally enshrined value of reciprocity (Ka'ili, 2005; Vakalahi & Godinet, 2008). The POs acknowledged that when Pasifika

youth were treated with respect, they were more likely to respond reciprocally. The improved youth outcomes therefore appear to have been facilitated by Pasifika POs' provision of culturally responsive care and practice that was vā-driven and mana-enhancing.

In summary, the most effective practices that achieve improved outcomes for Pasifika youth appear to be primarily initiated by Pasifika POs. The current degree of cultural responsivity has been achieved through the initiative of Pasifika POs who implemented their personal cultural knowledge to adapt what would otherwise be "standard" practice, and were thereby able to build better engagement with Pasifika young people and with their families.

RQ 2: What could be improved in reducing reoffending and improving outcomes for Pasifika youth with violent offending behaviour?

An overwhelming need for community-delivered Pasifika interventions was identified by participants. They highlighted that the gap in community programmes for Pasifika was particularly in violence prevention. Also, the participants felt a wraparound approach was needed, including a review of the high probation caseloads for those that work with Pasifika youth.

Participants affirmed the audited absence of Pasifika interventions consistent with previous literature (Department of Corrections, n.d.; Thakker, 2014). Given the absence of appropriate interventions for Pasifika youth, a Pasifika voice of advocacy would improve the organisational goal to provide effective youth interventions. The youth cohort has been critically identified as having higher reconviction trends than all subsequent age groups over 24 years (Ludbrook, 2012). Across Aotearoa, reconviction rates were 71% to 83% for youth on probation and 60% to 71% for youth on parole (Nadesu, 2009a, 2009b). Ioane and Lambie (2016) confirmed that high rates prevail for Pasifika, reporting a 73% rate of reoffending from sampled youth following a previous violent offence. Without adequate programmes, the theorised "prison pipeline" remains uninterrupted; that is, where early engagement with the criminal justice system (as a child or adolescent) puts the young person on a high-risk pathway towards ending up in adult prison (Lambie, 2018; Whakauae Research for Māori Health and Development, 2021). Pasifika young people face compounding systemic vulnerability alongside rangatahi Māori, and the earlier they become involved with the justice system, the greater the volatility of their subsequent trajectories (Whakauae Research for Māori Health and Development, 2021). A community-based equivalent of Saili Matagi was explicitly requested by our participants; however, programme adjustments would be required to achieve age specificity, given that Saili Matagi serves Pasifika adults (Heffernan et al., 2017).

A wraparound approach was stressed by participants as a way to bridge the gaps in the existing response that leaves the needs of Pasifika youth unmet. Development of violent offending behaviour was likened to a domino effect by one PO, whereby the forces of preceding factors elicit the presenting behaviour. Recommendations included hosting expo days that connect youth and their families to service providers, as well as bolstering onsite mental health training and onsite resources. Wraparound responding is strongly endorsed within the social welfare and justice reform literature, an approach designed to minimise out-of-home placements for youth facing clinical mental distress (Atwool, 2021). SAM tables were referenced in our talanoa as a positive change; however, this inter-agency service is a specialised response to family violence in the community (Mossman et al., 2017). Although participants in our study, and previous literature, jointly acknowledged the prevalence of family violence in Pasifika families, SAM tables may be inaccessible to youth who offend outside the family context (Fa'alau & Wilson, 2020; Fiaui & Hishinuma, 2009; Lambie, 2018). Coordinated inter-agency responses would undoubtedly help address the service needs of Pasifika in the criminal justice system; however, culturally responsive agencies are critical to facilitating safe, mana-enhancing engagement for families, which have been observed in Indigenous initiatives in Aotearoa, Australia and Canada (Atwool, 2021; Finseth, 2014; Smith et al., 2019; Whānau Ora Review Panel, 2019).

Lastly, culturally responsive practice requires that more time be devoted per Pasifika youth. Participants stressed the requirement of more time to meaningfully teu le vā, identifying that relationships with youth and families would exponentially benefit all involved. Participants also noted that their high caseloads minimised the time they could invest in each young person and their family, time that was identified as critical for teu le vā to enable optimal relationships and higher engagement in helping the younger person move away from the prison pipeline (Airini et al., 2010; Lambie, 2018).

To improve vā-driven practice, caseloads of POs working with Pasifika youth must be appropriately adapted. A specialty probation team was piloted in the United States for individuals with complex mental health needs, whereby caseloads were reduced (Skeem et al., 2018). They found having a smaller caseload allowed for stronger relationships to be established and higher engagement from the service users, consistent with the insights shared by our participants for culturally responsive practice (Skeem et al., 2018).

Practice implications

The findings of this exploratory study hold three key implications of practice:

1. Pasifika non-violence rehabilitation programme delivered in the community. Given the higher rates of violent offending amongst Pasifika youth and the absence of interventions in the community, this was a priority. A culturally responsive, age-appropriate, evidence-based programme needs to be designed and available in the community to maintain treatment gains.
2. Specialty Pasifika probation team. Establishing a specialty team would enable the team members to act as culturally responsive co-navigators to Pasifika youth as they complete their community sentence. Whilst it may be challenging to resource in the first instance, a long-term view of outcomes is needed to mitigate further risk of recidivism and harm to the community.
3. Inter-agency wraparound action. Effective responses address root causes instead of just managing behaviour. Collaborative provision of health and welfare services would provide stable pathways to wellbeing and prosocial lifestyles. Championing Whānau Ora as a broad, culturally responsive, family-centred initiative could provide Pasifika families with support to attain positive outcomes across economic, educational, employment and cultural domains (Te Puni Kōkiri, 2021).

Limitations/future research

The sample of this research project was limited by size, gender and location; however, it was designed as an exploratory study seeking new knowledge concerning Pasifika youth and offending behaviour. Future research could include service users' perspectives from Pasifika youth and their families.

Conclusion

This exploratory study facilitated a frontline talanoa with Pasifika POs, collecting their valuable perspectives on the experiences of Pasifika youth involved in the community corrections system in Aotearoa. The findings demonstrate that interventions that are culturally responsive and delivered in the community are needed, alongside reducing staff caseloads and pairing them appropriately with young service users. The development of a specialised Pasifika probation team that is vā-driven would enhance Pasifika youth engagement and outcomes, and would ultimately create an effective pathway that is transformative for the lives of Pasifika young people in our justice system.

As authors with Pasifika ancestry, we see a life course pathway that does not include any offending behaviour as the primary goal for our Pasifika youth. Whilst it was not a focus of this study, it is important to remind ourselves that a prosocial offence-free pathway should always be the aim when working with our Pasifika youth. Recent reports show that socioeconomic inequities and financial instability continue to be challenges faced by many of our Pasifika youth (Malatest International, 2021; Veukiso-Ulugia et al., 2024). Yet, these challenges are outside of their control whilst simultaneously being risk factors for youth offending (Ioane & Lambie, 2016; Kurpiel & McVie, 2025). Pasifika youth continue to emphasise their desire and motivation to connect to their cultural identity and heritage. This is likely to be even more important now, given their growing ethnic diversity. Therefore, strengthening opportunities to learn about culture, engage in cultural activities, and see their culture reflected in areas such as education, health and social services is a way to mitigate and ultimately eliminate opportunities for youth offending. This is likely to improve, enhance and sustain positive outcomes for our Pasifika leaders in the future.

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Author biographies

Rayna Tuina Tuunaifo Phillips (Sāmoa, 中国, Kernow) was born in Tāmaki Makaurau | Auckland. Her mother emigrated from Sāmoa in the 1960s to later marry a fourth-generation Pākehā whose family hail from Celtic Kernow (Cornwall). Rayna's maternal line traces connections to the seaward villages spanning from Iva to Satupai'tea

of Savai'i and Sataoa of Upolu. Like many other Sāmoan-Chinese families, Rayna's maternal great-grandfathers emigrated from 广州 (Guǎngzhōu) as colonial indentured labourers but were fortunate enough to find love, family and a new home in Talimatau. Driven by lived service-user experience and her values of tautua, alofa and social justice, Rayna is finalising her doctoral journey towards registration in clinical psychology. Her research interests include Indigenous approaches to wellbeing, youth justice, violence intervention/prevention and trauma recovery. The research reported in this article was conducted for an honours dissertation in Arts (Psychology) completed by the primary author and supervised by the second author.

Julia Ioane (Samoa) was born in Aotearoa New Zealand with ancestry to the villages of Fasito'outa and Leauva'a in Samoa. Her parents migrated to Aotearoa in the 1960s and 1970s and established family connections, teaching values such as care, respect and reciprocity to their three daughters. Julia is a registered clinical psychologist with ongoing practice experience in the justice sector. She primarily serves children, youth and their families across various court jurisdictions. She is also a member of the New Zealand Parole Board and the Health Practitioners Disciplinary Tribunal. As a professor at Massey University, Julia teaches in the Doctor of Clinical Psychology programme, supervising postgraduate and doctoral students primarily in justice-related research.

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Ethical considerations

Ethics approval was granted by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Northern, Application NOR 21/34.

Glossary

Māori

iwi	tribe
Kaupapa Māori	research approach that is informed by Māori philosophy and principles, and is by Māori, for Māori
mana	authority, prestige
Māori	Indigenous peoples of New Zealand
paihere	bind together, link; establish a collective alliance or connection
Pākehā	New Zealander of European descent
rangatahi Māori	Māori youth, young people
tāne	Māori men
tikanga	customs, rules
whakapapa	genealogy
whānau	family

Sāmoan

alofa	love
Fa'asāmoa	the Sāmoan way; the traditional Sāmoan way of life, culture, customs and social system
fono	meeting
gafa	genealogy, family tree, ancestral connection
mā	shame, shyness, modesty or humility; a deep-seated cultural awareness of social propriety and respect
Palagi	European, Pākehā, or person of non-Pacific/Western descent
Pasifika	pan-Pacific term referring to people of Pacific Island heritage living in Aotearoa New Zealand
soli le vā	breach of a relationship; stepping on, violating or disrespecting the vā between people
talanoa	meaningful conversation, dialogue or storytelling without a rigid agenda, used for building relationships and sharing knowledge
Tagata Pasifika	people with ancestry to the Pacific Islands who were either born in Aotearoa or migrated from the Pacific Islands
tausi le vā	nurture, care for and safeguard the sacred relational space between people or groups
tautua	service, supportive duty
teu le vā	care for and tend to the vā to maintain harmony and respect
vā	the relational space, or the distance and connection that holds people and things together

Tongan

kakala	flowers, leaves and fruits traditionally woven into a garland or neck ornament
Kakala framework	Pacific Indigenous research methodology based on the traditional Tongan process of making a kakala

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